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The CIA's misalliance with covert war

By William V. Kennedy

ANYONE who thought that the "reforms" introduced after the mid-1970s congressional investigations of the Central Intelligence Agency had solved the agency's problems should by now be thoroughly disillusioned.

To the mining of Nicaraguan harbors now has been added the primer on political assassination and Machiavellian manipulation, and even murder, of one's own associates.

The problem is not that the primer violates a succession of presidential directives against political assassination. Nor does it lie in inadequate supervision or inadequacies of this or that director.

There was a flaw built into the CIA at its foundation. Until that flaw is corrected we are going to be subjected to a chain of worsening embarrassments and crises that could corrupt — some would say already have corrupted — our foreign policy and our domestic politics.

The idea for creation of a centralized intelligence agency was born of the Dec. 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor disaster. Successive investigations had demonstrated that there was sufficient evidence on hand to have enabled the United States military to avoid at least tactical surprise, but service compartmentation and inadequate processing procedures precluded its timely use.

Thus, the Central Intelligence Agency was created in 1947 to serve this purely "intelligence" function.

Not the least of the reasons for the intelligence failures leading up to Pearl Harbor, however, was an American propensity for action rather than for the often dull and monotonous gathering and sifting of seemingly routine facts that is the heart and soul of the intelligence process.

Thus there had emerged during World War II an organization supposedly intended to produce strategic intelligence but which, in practice, was eminently activist in nature, reflecting the *nomme de guerre* of its founder, William J. (Wild Bill) Donovan. This was the "Office of Strategic Services."

The OSS was on the point of going out of business when the Central Intelligence Agency was created. By an act of legal and political legerdemain the remnants of the OSS were "folded into" the new agency.

The commando type activities that were the hallmark of the OSS had nothing to do with the production of intelligence. Yet in the years since, it was the OSS "camel" that took over the CIA "tent." As pointed out by the Senate investigators of the CIA in 1976, all the directors who have emerged from the agency itself have come from the OSS side of the agency — which now has become the "covert action" staff. The present CIA director, William J. Casey, is archetypical in that his only previous "intelligence" connection was with the World War II OSS.

The identification of "intelligence" as a separate and distinct activity is a product of the military staff system that emerged over the past 200 years. A clear distinction was established between intelligence on the one hand and military operations on the other because experience taught that it is all too tempting for operations staff officers to pick and choose the information likely to support a predetermined course of action. That is why in the American military staff system the operations and intelligence staff agencies are separate and at least nominally co-equal.

Permitting the OSS crowd to penetrate and take over the Central Intelligence Agency was a disaster. For it was

these people who sold a succession of American presidents, Democratic and Republican, on the notion that "covert action," supposedly concealed under the intelligence umbrella, provided an easy way out of the difficulties of the cold war. The national humiliations that have flowed from this in the Bay of Pigs fiasco of 1961, subversion of governments in Iran and Guatemala that promised a transition to more democratic institutions, and the bloody "Phoenix" program of Vietnam ill-fame down to the present imbroglios over CIA activities in Central America should have convinced us long ago that a drastic overhaul is needed.

Further, the involvement of former CIA "covert action" operatives in the Watergate crisis was a clear warning that sooner or later our own "house" is going to catch fire from the flames we are setting for others.

The most pressing need, therefore, is to remove the covert operations staff from the national intelligence establishment. Whether it should be retained as a reconstituted OSS or placed under control of the Department of Defense is a separate issue — to be determined by whether the national conscience can continue to live with this sort of activity without a formal declaration of war.

That would leave a separate, truly "intelligence" agency, which would be known as something other than its present title, for that has become a national liability. We have created a monster. We owe it to ourselves and to the people who look to us for leadership — in particular moral leadership — to do something about it.

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